

Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk**



BUT I WANT IT!

SHAVUOT

The Ten Commandments symbolize the Jewish people's eternal bond with God. The bestowing of these laws upon the two Tablets to our ancestors at the foot of Mt Sinai was, perhaps, the most dramatic moment in the history of humanity. So, it's a little disconcerting that we're not sure exactly how to count these Mitzvot. Is 'I am the Eternal, your God' a commandment or an introduction to the laws? Even though we are used to seeing artistic renderings of the Tablets with a big ANOCHI on top, many Sages disagree, and start the Mitzva count with 'Don't worship other gods.' This debate is focused on the nature of Mitzvot and relates directly to the Commandment I'm going to discuss, LO TACHMOD, 'don't covet'.

First of all, what is TACHMOD, 'covet'? The Hebrew word seems to come from the word for 'attractive' or 'cute', but probably 'desirable' in our context. So, the verse is saying don't desire, want, be envious of, or lust after 'your neighbor's house: you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox or ass,

or anything that is your neighbor' (Sh'mot 20:14). But what activity constitutes the performance of this sin? At what point have I transgressed?

That leads us to the crucial point about this whole scenario: Are there thought-crimes or must I actually do something to sin? Well, it seems that our rabbis are of two minds on this issue. Chizkuni says the sin is 'don't scheme'. On the other hand the Ra'avid leads a whole slew of authorities who say there is no sin until my desire is actualized into some nasty behavior of pressuring my neighbor into relinquishing ownership.

The Ibn Ezra sort of covers all of the possibilities by suggesting: The word CHAMAD has two meanings in Hebrew. One is to rob, to extort, to take someone's property by force and compulsion... The second meaning is to desire in the heart without acting. Now, Neither shalt thou covet thy neighbor's house is the ninth commandment, and thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife is the tenth commandment.

Cool. This one statement contains two of the Big Ten, because there is a sin in the lusting and another sin in the perpetration of the insidious plan. This one statement becomes far reaching indeed.

The Rambam suggests that the beginning of the Torah reading of K'doshim has ten mitzvot which parallel the Ten Commandments here. The Mitzva which corresponds to ours is: V'AHAVTA L'REI'ACHA KAMOCHA ('you should love your fellow as you love yourself', Vayikra 19:18). Rabbi Akiva, of course, declares that to be the greatest single concept in the Torah.

We are dealing with a very important principle, which must be analyzed very carefully, because it is seen in many guises by different scholars. Rav Avraham Yehoshua Heschel also weighed in on the significance of this precept: Nothing is as hard to suppress as the will to be a slave to one's own pettiness. Gallantly, ceaselessly, quietly, man must fight for inner liberty. Inner liberty depends upon being exempt from domination of things as well as from domination of people. There are many who have acquired a high degree of political and social liberty, but only very few are not enslaved to things.

If we can desist from LO TACHMOD we can free ourselves from materialism, and more easily strive for spirituality. Clearly, a worthy goal. But are we really supposed to eschew any desires for earthly things? I don't think so. As we celebrate the CHAG of SHAVUOT, don't we have a Mitzva

of SIMCHAT CHAG, and our Sages tell us that there is no SIMCHA without meat and wine. We're also instructed to wear nice clothes for the CHAG. Is that a contradiction? On the very anniversary of receiving this Mitzva, we are enjoined to enjoy physical things. We seem to believe that by using the physical world appropriately we can enhance our spiritual experience.

I think that Rabbeinu Bechaye helps us better understand this idea: Still, there are occasions when coveting is a character trait which is permitted. Coveting the opportunity to perform certain commandments of the Torah is not only permissible but is praiseworthy. This is what our sages had in mind (Bava Batra 21) when they said, "the envy displayed by scholars of the knowledge of other scholars who are their superiors leads to an all-round increase in wisdom."

In other words, we believe that every human emotion exists because there are positive goals which they can help us to achieve. Judaism never expects us to eliminate items in our psyche. Rather, we are enjoined to control and harness them. CHEMDA is no exception.

But it is the Ramban who, I believe, best instructed us in the utility of this emotion or trait. He famously wrote an essay called How to Derive the 613

Mitzvot from the Ten Commandments. In this essay, he looked at our 'sin' and utilized the principle 'from the negative one can intuit the positive' (M'LAV ATA SHOME'A HEIN). This led him to declare: It is implicit in LO TACHMOD ('don't covet') your neighbor's wife, that you should TACHMOD your own wife!

Our Commandment is not only prohibiting, it is also demanding. Everyone of us should be able to look at our spouse, our children, our home and declare: Wow, I love them. They are the most precious things in my world!!

The Ten Commandments, indeed, should guide our lives, and they conclude with what may be the most important lesson of all: Appreciate what you have! It's important for you to learn to love the things you've got. Then we can have true SIMCHA, and find meaning in our lives. CHAG SAME'ACH! 